



Concerted Action: The future of execution

April 2008

Executive summary – *Success has always depended on the right moves by the right people at the right times. This may seem straightforward, but we live in a complicated era: days of both Total Quality Management and beta testing; full-time employees and contractors; annual plans and elevator pitches. Sometimes classic approaches to execution work fine; in other circumstances, they guarantee failure. The future – or at least a piece of it – promises to be driven by rapid response to change, modularized work, time slicing, freelance talent, open organizations and an ever-widening cast of characters for any given endeavor. In such a world, effective execution will depend more and more on detecting change, building relationships, orchestrating action and learning as we go along.*

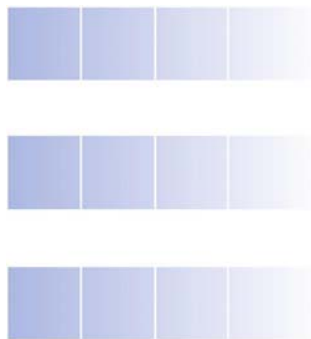
This Executive Technology Report is based on a personal essay by Peter Andrews, Consulting Faculty Member at the IBM Executive Business Institute in Palisades, New York.

In the face of a whole slew of “flat earth” drivers, organizations have been forced to reinvent themselves.¹ And it’s no secret that Generation Y has embraced social networking and views about employment that are starkly different from those of their parents. Not surprisingly, this is creating an environment that is challenging traditional approaches to effective execution.

Minding our own business

First, it is getting harder and harder to define the boundaries of a business. Is a car company still a car company when it has stripped itself down to core competencies? Is a Hollywood studio still in the movie business when it doesn’t shoot a single frame of film? In the face of outsourcing, business ecosystems and customer partnerships, who is still part of the firm and who isn’t becomes a bit of a mystery. And ownership of intellectual property, in the face of licensing, cross-licensing and open approaches, is often only clear to the lawyers.

These boundaries shift continually because we want ever bigger solutions at ever lower prices. If we want to execute effectively, we can’t use arbitrary organizational barriers or get caught up in whose fiefdom and activity or opportunity falls into.





Views about owning people and intellectual property can also get in the way of execution.

This is not to say that losing clarity is a good idea; it isn't. But a certain amount of flexibility and accommodation is essential to effective execution. The definition of a business and the value it brings may be rooted more in culture than in specific offerings. The essence of Starbucks, for instance, is the experience, not the coffee. The people who are in the business aren't indicated by an address, but by a network that understands and buys into basic principles, perspectives and accepted approaches. They are more likely to coexist in a rolodex than on an organization chart.

What does this imply? In addition to being more agile, those leading execution will need to take on the role of producers, engaging a variety of people and orchestrating their efforts while trying to make sure they have all the resources they need. There will still be cases where key projects are done by an in-place team reusing familiar processes and resources allocated on an annual cycle, but these will become less and less common.

Consensus realities

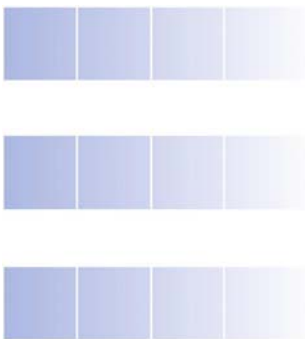
Any attempts at execution that are divorced from reality are doomed to failure. Classically, leaders have needed to battle against the natural tendencies of people in an organization to dodge responsibility, be selective in their facts and, generally, avoid giving bad news. This takes on a whole new aspect in a world where outsiders can become not just a source of information, but, as with blogging, a source of how information is interpreted. In addition to more people collecting and framing the data, there are more sources of intelligence vital to business. While, until recently, many kinds of information were scarce and expensive (e.g., survey-based opinions), nowadays the safest assumption is that the information is available already or easily generated.

Reality, for execution, depends on awareness of messages and participation in their creation. With everyone claiming expertise, the criteria for credentialing and confirming information need to be explicit and broadly agreed upon. And the processes for truth-testing need to be fast and efficient. Analysis paralysis is more fatal than ever.

The good news is that, 1) people are hungry for good validation criteria, so making them available can actually build your credibility and influence, and 2) whatever you do to systematically build trust will also strengthen your network for attracting and engaging with talented people.

Organizational pointillism

Successful execution still depends on goals, and those goals must be clear and prioritized. But where do these goals come from? Drucker said that knowledge





workers are volunteers, a perspective that has evidence in wikis and open source software.² As anyone who has worked with volunteers knows, you don't get anything done without their buy in. If they had no say in the plan, they are less likely to follow it. So the boss unilaterally issuing a series of orders from the top is not a great model for successful execution.

In addition to making sure the goals are understood and acceptable to a variety of free agents, those leading an endeavor have the new problem of fragmentation. E-mail, instant messaging and the chirps and tunes of cell phones are constantly interrupting and intruding on thoughts and activities. This has amplified a traditional problem of distinguishing immediate tasks from important tasks. But, even more importantly, it has broken our activities into tiny bits that may or may not emerge to create a whole. Both the recognition of the whole by individuals and the accountability of individuals for doing jobs well are in constant jeopardy.

To promote engagement, leaders need to have a clear idea themselves of what needs to be accomplished, not necessarily in detail, but in essence. They then need to communicate more frequently and use persuasive communications, not just instructions. Since participants share ownership of the goals, which may change in the specifics, leaders need to listen more – to the point of developing regular and rigorous ways of getting feedback on both attitudes and accomplishments.

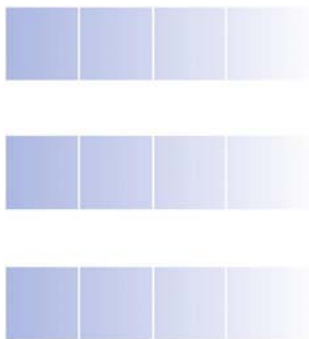
The fragmentation problem can be tackled by interruption management – using technical and social approaches to better manage everyone's time and attention. (Of course the best design of interruption management will fail if the practices and expectations of the leader undermine it.)

What's done isn't done

One of Robert Heinlein's rules for writers is "You must finish what you write."³ This echoes standard guidance for execution, which emphasizes follow through. Jobs must be completed, and that includes the final polish. But today, we live in a time where speed is a major component of success, where the world sees and works with beta and even alpha versions of offerings and where upgrades and patches seem to be a part of daily life. In addition, many offerings have the potential for both authorized and unauthorized tweaking long after they are "finished."

This can be taken too far, with trivial upgrades, a never-ending requirements process and the practice of using customers for quality control. But the more dynamic nature of offerings, largely drawn from new capabilities in reducing production cycles and providing after-sale service, has become part of what people expect.

That means "end of job" must be planned for. Delivery needs to be thought of as a milestone, with the team having agreed upon principles (and responsibilities) for upgrading and retiring offerings. A mechanism must be defined for tracking





changes, with special attention to validating feedback and developing meaningful measures. Within all of this, a perspective on quality must be maintained and reinforced across the team.

One size does not fit all

The traditional, static job description has become inadequate for many endeavors, so it's no surprise that formulas for compensation, credit and rewards are being challenged. While these were set up to create fairness, they often do the exact opposite in a continually changing environment that is not supported well by classic organizational structures.

At the same time, there is more variety in what people need in terms of a reasonable return for their investments in time and talent. Reputation, experience, association with projects and inclusion in a social network may, for some, be more important than salary and stock options.

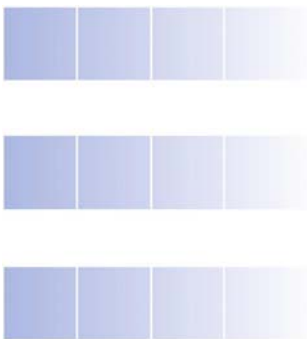
Making sure that rewards do what they are supposed to do – motivate specific behavior and create a climate of fairness – has never been easy. Today, identifying the true contributors on a diverse team that participates in bits and pieces, *and* guaranteeing that they agree that their compensation is just and relevant – that the experience is what it should be – have become, arguably, the hardest jobs for a leader.

There is no perfect answer, but it all starts with understanding. Measurement and fairness are social, so participants need to be engaged and their expectations need to be set and then met. To the extent that is possible, there needs to be choices on compensation, and there must be a new level of transparency that creates trust across the group. Reviews must be regular, not just annual or at the end of projects. The reward process, overall, will never be perfect. In fact, both laws and cultural differences have created a legacy that makes that impossible. The standard must be having a methodology that resonates well enough with the talent you need to engage with so that current and future projects can be successful. How do you know things are working well? Compare your approach with that of others and listen to your participants.

The learning community

Execution, of course, has always depended on people having up-to-date capabilities and skills. Employee development remains a vital part of a leader's responsibilities. While on-the-job training has been important in many fields, the center of gravity has usually been course work, with a special emphasis on degrees and on accredited continuing education.

That center of gravity appears to be shifting. Fewer people continue to work in the discipline their degree represents, the half life of formal education keeps shrinking in the face of change, and many people, especially those in Generation Y, have





recognized that work on leading-edge projects is becoming their best hope of maintaining skills and opening up opportunities for advancement.

How do we get people involved in work that helps them to grow and develop? How do we determine that they have really learned anything and not just gone along for the ride? How do we properly accredit them and make sure that the sum of bits of learning adds up to value, that that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts?

The first step is to really value learning, whether formal or experience-based, and publicly honor the growth and development of individuals. And a leader who sets aside time and resources for development and demonstrates its value through personal engagement will be more likely to have access to a community of talented people with the most valued capabilities.

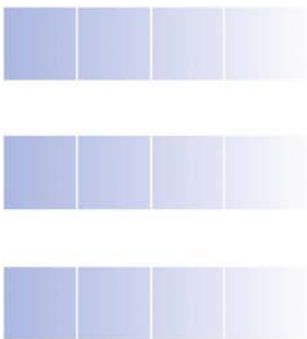
Making development opportunities available to everyone, not just a chosen few, is also important. If natural aptitudes are randomly distributed, then the democratization of learning not only sets the tone for a community, it assists in the identification of talent. A corollary to the perspective is the need to tolerate, perhaps even celebrate, failure. It is a maxim that any organization that does not have failures is not stretching itself or learning, but everyone knows what the real rules are: don't mess up. Ultimately, this is a tragic limit to organizational execution.

Finally, investing in mentoring and developing accreditation associated with such efforts may be the shortest path toward the very difficult challenge of certification in a changing world.

The future is outside your comfort zone

With all the changes to other aspects of execution noted above, it should not be a surprise that leadership needs to evolve. The model of the autocratic executive, even when that person is highly skilled and benevolent, does not fit very well. While leaders will continue to have capabilities in planning, organizing and communicating, the emphasis will be more on networking, facilitating and listening. Decisions will still need to be made, but they will be more closely scrutinized and debated. And, perhaps most problematic for today's leaders, authority will need to be shared. More and more, the person who has clarity of the moment will need to take on leadership responsibilities, and the formal leader will need to find ways to support his or her efforts. This will put a new spin on delegation and will require an amount of humility that might not come naturally.

Another important point: leaders will need to be more available. For the new approaches to work, they will need to be responsive to questions and feedback. They will need to explore new ideas and perspectives. They'll need to spend more time learning and unlearning, often in domains that are not familiar.



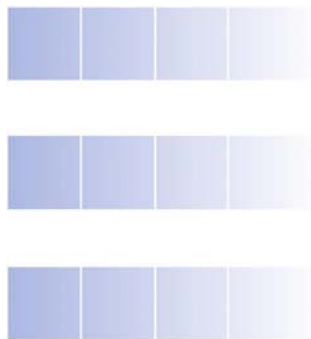


In summary, a leader who is looking for excellence in execution may need to make adjustments to adapt to a changing world:

- Views on what the business is and who participates may need to be broadened in scope and deepened in terms of the value delivered and the values held.
- Assessment of facts and what is real needs to be less parochial, with awareness of and roles of outsiders.
- The tasks themselves must have limits and goals that recognize the autonomy of participants and deal with the fragmentary nature of our lives.
- Completion has become a moving target, so the stages of “job done” need to be explored, determined and articulated clearly.
- The needs and desires of the workforce and the difficulties in assessing contributions have reached a new level of complexity, and this demands that the leader invest more time and ingenuity in ensuring that rewards are fair and relevant.
- On the job learning and experience have become larger components in the development of capabilities, so development opportunities and mechanisms of accreditation need to be updated to reflect their emerging importance to maintaining vitality in a fast-changing world.
- Those who hope to be leaders of execution need to balance decisiveness with a greater emphasis on engagement and facilitation that makes the most of the talents and points of view that are available.

Of course, the above are all tempered by how traditional an endeavor or organization is. But, for even the most hidebound and defined group, there probably are elements of this emerging perspective that

Technology to watch
Social networking
Experience engineering
Blogging
Tagging
Service-oriented architecture
Reputation management





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Of interest

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Anyone who has tried to innovate knows how difficult it is. The first step is understanding the full value of the innovation you want and being able to communicate this. But even an idea whose time has come will face common obstacles of funding, working across the organization, dealing with change and managing risk.

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